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THE MARTYR PRESIDENT.

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A SERMON

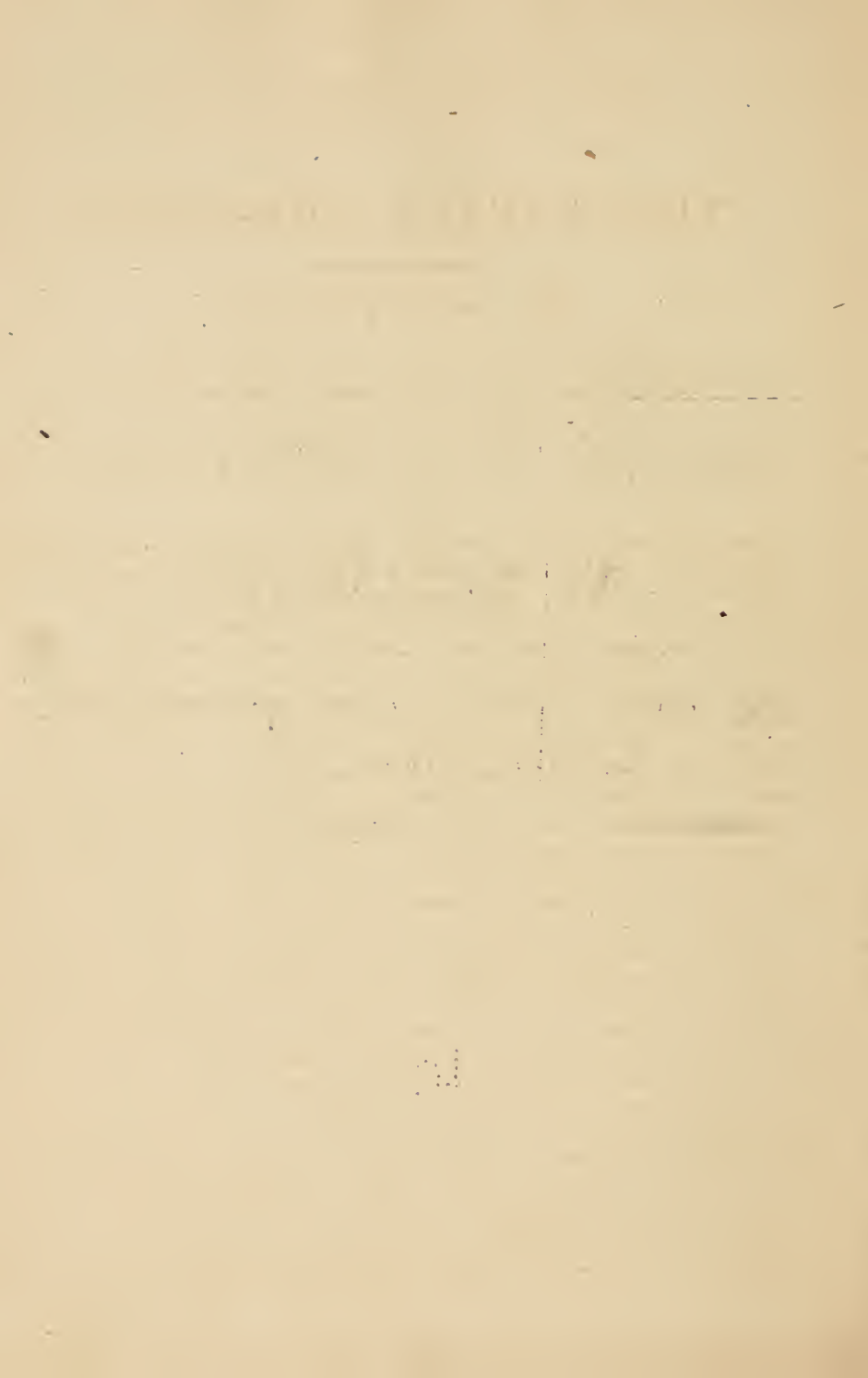
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DELIVERED IN THE COURT HOUSE IN WILLIAMSPORT.

BY REV. WILLIAM STERLING,

ON SUNDAY, APRIL 23, 1865.

"Bulletin" Print, Third street.





THE MARTYR PRESIDENT.

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN THE COURT HOUSE IN WILLIAMSPORT,

BY REV. WILLIAM STERLING,

ON SUNDAY, APRIL 23, 1865.

Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?—2d Samuel—3d: 38.

This is the lamentation of David over the murdered Abner, who fell by the treacherous hand of Joab. It was a bloody assassination of a "prince and a great man;" and just at a moment, too, when he was exerting all his influence to restore peace to the kingdom, and to bring to an end a rebellion which had lasted for eight years. The pious King was horror-stricken by the fearful tragedy, and the monarch and all the people wept as they followed the slaughtered chieftain to the grave.

There are some events, which break upon us, like a clap of thunder in a clear sky. They stun us. The shock is so sudden—so unexpected, that our faculties are paralyzed. We are bewildered. Our mouths are shut. The power of thought and feeling is almost suspended. We want time for reflection, for tears, for prayer, for our shattered powers to recover from the dreadful blow, before we are capable of fully comprehending them in their causes and their consequences. Such an event is that awful tragedy, which has occurred at our Nation's Capitol—the murder of our beloved President, as well as the attempt to assassinate the Secretary of State and those by whom he was surrounded on his bed of sickness.

The Nation was, at the moment, dreading no evil. On the contrary, every loyal heart was bounding with unutterable joy. Lee and his army were captured, and the Capitol of the Confederacy was in our hands. Victory was crowning our arms in every quarter—the rebellion was melting away. After four long years of war, and blood, and tears, and woe, the dove of peace seemed ready to descend upon us. The whole land was jubilant. The national emblems everywhere floated proudly and gaily in the breeze, and everywhere were heard the sounds of gladness and of thanksgiving to God. And peculiarly was that fourteenth day of the month a proud and happy day; for that day the Flag again floated over Sumpter, elevated with appropriate honors; and the booming cannon, from all our national ships, and forts, and camps, proclaimed the exultant, joyous feelings that bounded through the Nation's heart.

It was at such a time, and under such circumstances, that the murderer sought his victim. In a moment the hellish deed was done. ABRAHAM LINCOLN lies weltering in his blood. "A prince and a great man has fallen;" one on whom the affections and the hopes of a great people were centered, lies speechless and insensible. Those wires,

which for months had been the bearers of nought but glad tidings, suddenly change to awful tones. A Nation's ear is palsied, and its blood stands still, and its pulse ceases to beat, as the fearful news flashes from city to city, and from State to State—*President Lincoln is Murdered*. He is shot through the head. The ball has entered his brain. He lies speechless and insensible. He is dying. *He is dead*.

I. Let me speak of the greatness of this national affliction. "A prince and a great man has fallen;" one whose pure morality and tried integrity, whose private virtues and public usefulness entitled him to the respect and confidence of the Nation over which he had been called a second time to preside.

President LINCOLN was an honest man.—His integrity was above suspicion. Never was there, since the days of WASHINGTON, a public man more wholly free from all guile and trickery and double-dealing. He had no low, selfish ends to answer. He was a man of truth, and of the utmost transparency of character. With him there was no concealment of his real opinions and ends. He left no doubt in any mind as to where he stood, and what his course would be, on any of the momentous questions with which he had to deal.

He was a man of great kindness of heart. He was not only genial and conciliatory among his friends, but he cherished no enmity toward his foes. He sympathized deeply with the sick and wounded soldiers, visiting them in the hospitals, and saying a kind word to cheer and comfort them under their sufferings. And he even endeavored to win back the bitterest enemies of the Government to their allegiance by gentleness and forgiveness.

He was a man of strong native intellect. His scholarship was not profound and comprehensive, like that of John Quincy Adams. nor was he much conversant with elegant literature. His early opportunities for mental improvement were limited. But he was a

man of excellent sense and judgment. Nor was he deficient in any of those branches of knowledge essential to the proper discharge of his duties. He was an able President. He was sometimes slow in coming to a decision; but when his mind was made up, he was firm as a rock; and his reasons were so clear, and cogent, and convincing, that he usually produced the conviction in the mind of the people that he was right in his position.

His manners were plain and simple, his disposition frank and cheerful, and his life a pattern of moral virtue. But, beyond all this, I think the evidence strong that *he was a pious man*. And here I must in candor say, that there are two things greatly to be regretted in regard to him. One is, his occasional visit to the theatre. And yet I suppose it is difficult for us to understand the influences by which he was surrounded, and by which he was drawn into such a place. Probably the leading motive may have been a desire to please his friends and to gratify that class of the public who attend such amusements, by an occasional appearance in their midst.

The other is, that he did not make a public profession of religion. This is an obligation binding upon all, the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the President and the citizen alike. It is a duty which he owed to his God and Savior, the neglect of which cannot be justified. That he did not discharge it is to be lamented, because he would, as an open, active and consistent member of the church of Christ, have honored his profession; and his usefulness to the cause of God on earth would have been more extensive and benign.

But whatever were the reasons which withheld him from making a public profession of religion, it is obvious that he was not inattentive to the duties of personal piety. In his Inaugural Addresses and Messages, he distinctly and reverently acknowledged his dependence on God; and in his frequent calls upon the Nation to seek the

Divine favor by humiliation and prayer, and to thank and praise God for victory, he showed his anxiety that the entire people should be penetrated with a sense of our National dependence and obligations. There are two facts, however, which, although I have referred to them before under other circumstances, I must be permitted to refer to now as evidences of his piety. The one is a declaration from his own lips, and is distinct and unequivocal in its utterance. I will give it to you as it has been published :

"A gentleman having recently visited Washington on business with the President, was, on leaving home, requested by a friend to ask Mr. Lincoln whether he loved Jesus. The business being completed, the question was kindly asked. The President buried his face in a handkerchief, turned away and wept. He then turned and said:—*'When I left my home to take this chair of State, I requested my countrymen to pray for me; I was not then a christian. When my son died—the severest trial of my life—I was not a christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and looked upon the graves of our dead heroes who had fallen in defense of their country, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ. I do love Jesus.'*"

The other fact is the testimony of a gentleman, which I will give you in his own words:

"Having business which led me to Washington and demand an interview with the President, I called at his mansion to ascertain at what time he could give me a hearing. His reply was that he would meet me the next morning at an hour as early as I pleased. Wishing him to designate the hour, he did so, naming five o'clock. It seemed a little strange to me that he would be able to see me so early; but I was satisfied, and returned to my lodgings; but the anxiety lest I should not awake in time prevented sleep. Morning at length came, and I hastened my toilet, and found myself at a quarter to five in the waiting room of the President. I asked the usher if I could see Mr. Lincoln. He said I could not. But I have an engagement to meet him this morning. At what hour? At five o'clock. Well, sir, you will see him at five. I then walked to and fro a few minutes, and hearing a voice as if in grave conversation, I asked the servant: Who is talking in the next

room? It is the President, sir. Is anybody with him? No, sir; he is reading the Bible. Is that his habit so early in the morning? Yes, sir; he spends every morning from four to five o'clock in reading the Scriptures and prayer."

Blessed be God for these gleams of heavenly light, revealing to us the habits and feelings of our lamented President. He loved Jesus, the Divine and only Savior. He daily and devoutly sought comfort and support and guidance from God, in the study of his holy word and in secret prayer. He rose at the early hour of four o'clock, that he might devote the calm hour of the morning to communion with his Maker, and thus prepare his mind for the duties of the day. This was the secret of the clearness of his mind, the cheerfulness and hopefulness of his spirit, the calmness of his confidence in the darkest hours, and the strength of his position in the hearts of the people. Who is not reminded of that pious King who said: "*My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O, Lord; in the morning will I direct my prayers unto thee and will look up. Mine eyes prevented the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word.*"

And this is the man that has fallen from his high place by a murderer's hand! A praying President—a President who daily held intercourse with heaven—a President who sought guidance and grace for himself and blessings on the land at the foot of the throne;—a President who loved Jesus, who was kind and considerate to the poorest and lowest that came into his presence, or sought his aid;—a President who was so full of mercy and forgiveness towards his enemies, so pure a patriot, so worthy of the place to which God in his providence had elevated him;—this is the man that the bullet of the assassin has reached, and over whose untimely and violent end the Nation mourns to-day! He died in the midst of life and health—seated by the side of his wife—at a time of the most enraptured joy—a joy which he himself doubtless shared to the full; and at a time, too, when the affections

and hopes of the Nation were centered more fully than ever upon him. He had conducted the Nation through four years of peril and conspiracy and rebellion, and when the wilderness of suffering seemed almost passed, and the promised land of rest and peace already greeted his anxious, longing eyes, in that moment, in the mysterious providence of God, the murderous deed was done. He lies to-day in death, with millions for his mourners,—*the martyred President.*

II. The crime which has been committed in the murder of such a man, occupying such a position, is one of unparalleled atrocity. I know nothing that surpasses it, save only the murder of the Son of God. It is to stand out before the universe while time shall last, as the blackest deed which man ever committed against his fellow-man. It was not a mere act of revenge against ABRAHAM LINCOLN as an individual; but it was an attempt to murder a Nation in its head. The crime was against the Government which he administered; against the principles which he represented; against the law and order which he endeavored to maintain; against the rights, the liberties, the hopes, the happiness, the prosperity of the whole people, of which ABRAHAM LINCOLN was the constitutional guardian.

The intention to commit the crime has long existed in the same quarter. Four years ago, the abettors of treason in Baltimore plotted the murder of the President. And so well was it understood by the leaders, that it was confidently predicted by them that he would never reach Washington alive. And it was only through the timely discovery of the plot by his friends, that the infernal attempt failed at that time.

Before the battle of Bull Run, a second conspiracy was formed to murder him and General Scott. And Beauregard, who was then commanding the Rebel army, was privy to the scheme. A letter of his, written at the time, not only alludes to this plot, but urges that it be promptly carried out.—

But although the dark and bloody plot failed twice, it has at length been successful. The Nation feels the blow, and every true heart bleeds, and feels that “a prince and a great man has fallen.”

Nor can we suppose, for a moment, that the monster who murdered the President, and the other assassin who attempted the life of the Secretary of State, and their immediate accomplices in Washington, were the only persons concerned in the horrid scheme. Every circumstance indicates a wide-laid plot, in the interests of *the great rebellion*. We were told in the winter, by prisoners and refugees from Richmond, that something was about to be done that would astonish the world; and rebel correspondents in the London papers intimated that something tremendous and unlooked for would ere long happen,—that if they were beaten in the field, there were other means which would be resorted to, and which they hoped would accomplish their ends. Now it is true that these utterances are somewhat vague and oracular; but they are not, therefore, without meaning. And does not their meaning begin to flash upon us in the light of the tragedies enacted and attempted at Washington? The “something that was to astonish the world” has, at least in part, been carried out according to the programme.

I would not be understood as asserting it as a fact, and yet I cannot avoid the conviction, that this diabolical scheme of murder was known to the rebel leaders, or at least to some of them. It is the crowning act of a long series of crimes the most desperate and villainous that ever blackened the annals of time. The actors were but the agents and representatives of the savage spirit of Slavery driven to the last pitch of rage and fury by overwhelming defeat in every quarter.

It is a deep disgrace that such a deed could be perpetrated in our land. France has had her Infernal Machine, and her frequent attempts on the lives of her sovereigns,

and her Reign of Terror; and we have felt that these deed were to be accounted for by the infidelity that prevails. But in this land of the pious Pilgrims, the land of Washington;—in this land of Bibles and of the Sabbath and the Sanctuary,—this land of Christian civilization, it was thought that such an event could not take place. That such a murder should blacken the annals of our country fills us with shame, as well as with grief and horror. But this infamy belongs not to our *whole* country, but to the Rebellion and its animating soul, Slavery; of whose cruel and barbarous spirit this act of murder is one of the natural fruits. It is the same inhuman wickedness, only leveled at a higher and more shining mark, which wrought into ornaments the bones of our soldiers who fell at Bull Run; which organized a scheme to burn our northern cities, and to fire hotels, in which hundreds of persons were sleeping; which slaughtered our soldiers after they had surrendered, at Fort Pillow; which tortured and butchered and starved our noble men in Libby Prison, and Belle Isle, and Castle Thunder, and Andersonville and Sailsbury. That this dreadful deed is the ripened fruit of rebel hatred and revenge cannot be doubted. It is what the leaders desired, and multitudes of others wished for; and with a knowledge of the future, apparently as infallible as that of the ancient seers, they confidently and unblushingly predicted it.

And may it not be said, that many at the North have, by their words at least, lent encouragement to the treason and rebellion that have thus culminated? They did not plan the deed, they were not cognizant to the infernal plot, but they showed in many ways that their sympathies were with the traitors, in whatever they did, or might attempt; they palliated their crimes against the Government; their whole course helped to nerve the arm that drew the fatal trigger. What can we say of that grand conspiracy of the Knights of the Golden Circle, but that they are desperate men, aiding and

abetting the rebellion with all its horrors, and ready for any deed of blood, by which the Government may be overthrown;—pledged, according to the testimony of some of their officers, to murder the officers of the Government and of the Army, as well as all soldiers and citizens who stand in their way? And has not language been used in almost every community,—even in our own,—not only by men, but by women, which embodied a wish for the very event which has occurred. Has not a portion of the northern press counselled to violent deeds?

There are those at the North, then, that have a weighty responsibility to bear in this great crimes. In the sight of Heaven, they are sharers in the awful guilt of this murder.

III. My hearers, there is a Providence that rules in the affairs of men. In permitting the murder of our beloved President, God must have some wise designs to accomplish. What these designs may be, it is not for us at present *fully* to know. Our duty is to be still and know that he is God; to bow submissively under his mighty hand; to rest assured that not a sparrow falls, nor a hair from any head, without his knowledge; that he is able to make the wrath of man to praise him, and to restrain the remainder. May not one of the reasons be this:

1st. To deepen our abhorrence of the rebellion. Just at this point, may it not have become necessary, in the judgment of God, to open our eyes more widely to the character of the men with whom we have to deal, and to the spirit by which they are actuated? May not God have allowed this illustration of the spirit and character of this foul conspiracy against liberty and good government to take place, in order that the whole world may see its desperate wickedness, and stamp it with everlasting infamy? that the last feeling of sympathy with it, both at home and abroad, may be utterly and forever destroyed? Who can ever again have the face to speak one word in favor of a rebellion, that resorts to such means to reach its ends?

Even among the most devoted friends of the Government, I think there was danger that the crimes of *Treason, Rebellion, and Murder* would be treated too leniently; and that their enormity would be overlooked to a great extent, as soon as the war power of the rebels was broken. There is a leaning in the human mind to palliate crime, and to set aside the claims of justice; and some falsely suppose that this is a dictate of piety. But treason, rebellion, and murder are crimes of crimson dye,—the greatest crimes that men can commit against the rights and interests of society; and God, in his wise and holy sovereignty, is engraving this lesson on the heart and conscience of this Nation now.

Our Government is the wisest, the mildest, the best which has ever existed on earth.—Its privileges and blessings have been purchased by the best blood that ever flowed in human veins. Under it we were prosperous and happy beyond a parallel, and taking a high place among the Nations of the earth. Now look at the end proposed by this Rebellion. It is nothing less than the destruction of American liberty, and of free government on this vast continent. If any of you doubt this, listen to a few of the utterance of southern Statesmen. Said a Georgia Senator on the floor of Congress:

“Drive the Black Republicans from the Temple of Liberty, or pull down its pillars, and involve him in a common ruin.”

Here we have the design of the rebellion clearly and frankly stated.

Said a South Carolina Representative:—

“We have the issue now upon us, and how are we to meet it? *Just to tear the Constitution of the United States, trample it under foot, and form a Southern Confederacy, every State of which shall be a slave-holding State.*”

And what said Mr. Stephens, as to the object of the rebellion, at a time when he was opposing it? The object is, he says:—

“The overthrow of the American Government, established by our common ancestry, cemented and built by their sweat and blood, and founded on the broad principles

of right, justice and humanity. And as such, I must declare here, as I have often done before, and which has been repeated by the greatest and wisest of Statesmen and patriots in this and other lands, that it is the best and the freest government,—the most equal in its rights, the most just in its decisions, the most lenient in its measures, and the most inspiring in its principles to elevate the race of man, that the sun of heaven ever shone upon.”

And now, my hearers, how are we to look upon the leaders in such a work as this? Are we to regard with indulgent lenity the men who, through four years of bloody war, have striven to rend in pieces the bond of our Union, pull down the Temple of Liberty, and convulse the country in ruin?—No, no, no! Their crime is like that which cast the angels out of heaven. No words of man can express its enormity. No punishment which man can inflict is commensurate with the crime.

And superadded to this, look at the perjury of men in office at the beginning of the war, holding places of honor, and trust, and emolument under the Government; look at the robbery, the treason they have committed, the blood they have shed on the battle-field, and the sufferings of our prisoners who fell into their hands. Can you read the testimony of these prisoners; can you look upon these shattered wrecks of men with their sunken eyes, and hard and shriveled and ashy skins, and wasted forms; can you behold these starved and fleshless, yet living skeletons; can you hear them tell the pitiful story of their fearful wrongs and suffering, and not feel your blood grow hot like fire in your veins? Can you read or hear their tale of woe, and not feel every nerve in your body quiver with agony and indignation? If you can, your temperament is cooler than mine. And shall the authors of these miseries go unpunished? Forbid it justice! Forbid it, every right, and true, and patriotic, and christian principle!

The whole world ought to understand the diabolical spirit of this rebellion, and of the

men who led it. Our rulers ought to understand it. They should have deeply wrought into their souls a sense of the duty laid upon them, as ministers of justice and of God, bearing not the sword in vain, to crush such iniquities and to make the punishment as broad, as signal, and as conspicuous as the crime.

It is a sin against God and humanity, to be in the slightest degree indifferent to such crimes or lukewarm as to their punishment. The deepest peril, present and future, must environ a people, who can calmly form their policy to conciliate the authors of such enormities. The very foundations of morality and justice must be undermined when this can occur. God, in his awful Providence, is speaking loudly to us in this matter now. This last deed of the rebellion speaks to us in trumpet tones; it assures us that this demon spirit cannot be cast out by mildness and clemency, nor subdued by forgiveness. It needs sterner treatment.

2d. May not God, by permitting this murder of our good and kind President, intend to lead us all to a juster view of the system of slavery? It was the malignant spirit of the slave system that struck down the President of the United States. It is this that has brought upon us all the horrors of this long and fearful war. The purpose and chief end of the rebellion was to establish a government that should extend and perpetuate human slavery. They put everything they possessed in the struggle to support and strengthen that system, which they intended should be their foundation of greatness. But they miscalculated the providence of God. Instead of strengthening and perpetuating, they have destroyed it forever.

As a system passing away, I need not dwell upon its unrighteousness, upon the wrongs and oppressions of its innocent victims. I wish simply to draw your attention to its demonizing effect upon the masters. It is this that has steeled their hearts to the claims of humanity and justice, and made

them what they are. The atrocities committed through long years upon the black race prepared them to act the part they have acted during the war. It was the hardening process through which the southern heart had gone, that made them insensible to the sufferings of our prisoners in their hands; that led them to starve and murder them, to taunt and abuse them, to rob them of their clothing and leave them to suffer from cold and nakedness and disease, to shoot them as wild beasts when they came to the window-bars of their prisons to breathe the air of heaven, and to bury them with the burial of dogs. It was this that led them to commit such awful cruelties upon their own neighbors, and fellow-citizens, whose only offense was that they refused to join with them in the destruction of the Government and the overthrow of Liberty. These barbarities few have regarded in their just light. But this last terrible act in the appalling drama, shows us what the true spirit of Slavery is; that we are fighting with demons, made so by the crimes and cruelties they have so long practiced upon the defenceless beings who were under their power. Slavery has destroyed their moral sentiments; made them haughty and self-willed, unfeeling and revengeful; taught them to undervalue the lives and happiness of their fellow-men; familiarized them to blood, and cruelty, and wrong; seared their consciences, and maddened them to strike down every institution, and every man, be his situation what it might, that stood in the way of the extension and perpetuity of their horrible system. Who will not say to-day, that it is time that the system which breeds such monsters were swept from our country and from the civilized world?

3d. May not another reason why God permitted the event we so deeply mourn, be to draw our affections still more to our country? It was purchased by us by the toils, and sacrifices, and blood of the heroes of the Revolution. It has just been bap-

tized afresh by the blood of its noblest patriots; and everywhere its soil has become sacred with their honored graves. And as though all this were not enough to endear our country to us forever, its soil has now been wet with the blood of its martyred President. Surely this is enough. Shall not these sacrifices stir up every heart to loyalty and patriotism? Shall not every one feel that the Union, which has cost so dearly, "*must and shall be preserved?*"

We trust the day of peace is dawning, and that a bright future awaits us; and that our children, to the latest generation, will bless our memory for the inheritance of freedom which, by God's great goodness, we shall be permitted to leave them; and that they will faithfully guard the sacred legacy.

4th. Another thought and I shall close: God in this great calamity, is teaching us the vanity of earthly greatness. It would be difficult to conceive of any combination of circumstances better adapted to impress a people with the vanity of all things earthly, than those in which death has now achieved his conquest. He who has fallen occupied the very pinnacle of society—the highest place on earth. He had attained the utmost that a lawful ambition could desire. But while his glories were yet fresh upon him, the destroyer came. Scarcely had the intelligence of his second inauguration spread through the land, ere his

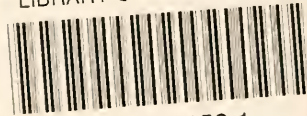
earthly career was finished, and his soul was summoned to the bar of God. We look back but a few weeks, and read the record of that day, and survey the scene of splendor and of joy, and hear the shouts of the assembled multitudes; and while we look and listen, already the vision has faded away like a dream. President Lincoln is no more! And now, instead of acclamations of joy, we hear the dirge of woe; instead of the triumphal procession, we see the funeral train! What sad countenances we behold! What melancholy greetings, what tolling bells, what badges and voices of mourning throughout the land! One great funeral pall has been let down, as if it were, by the four corners from heaven; and it rests upon the whole nation.

Who can reflect upon the change of these few weeks, without feeling how vain, and empty, and evanescent are the highest honors that the world can give? God is speaking to us to-day in solemn tones. He is reminding us that "all flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass." We know not where, or when, or how death may meet us. It may be in the bosom of our family, or it may be abroad among strangers; it may be by lingering sickness, or the lightning's flash, or the assassin's hand. Let us so live, that come he as he may, we shall be prepared for the momentous change.

Oct-11-67

R. H. H. H.

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